



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1080/03003930.2018.1473769](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2018.1473769)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Ryan, M., Stoker, G., John, P., Moseley, A., James, O., Richardson, L., & Vannoni, M. (2018). How best to open up local democracy? A randomised experiment to encourage contested elections and greater representativeness in English parish councils. *LOCAL GOVERNMENT STUDIES*, 1-22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2018.1473769>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# **How best to open up local democracy? A randomised experiment to encourage contested elections and greater representativeness in English parish councils<sup>+</sup>**

Matt Ryan (\*\*\*\*), Gerry Stoker (\*\*\*\*\*), Peter John (\*), Alice Moseley (\*\*), Oliver James (\*\*),

Liz Richardson (\*\*\*), and Matia Vannoni (\*)

(\*) King's College London, (\*\*) University of Exeter, (\*\*\*) University of Manchester

(\*\*\*\*) University of Southampton (\*\*\*\*\* University of Canberra

+ Output from the Economic and Social Research Council project, *Citizen Contribution to Local Public Services: Field Experiments in Institutions Incorporating Social Information*, ES/J012424/1.

We thank the council for its support. We are very grateful to the chief executives of the CALCs who worked with us to develop the experiment. They were very patient as we revised our research design in successive meetings. We especially thank Steven Lugg from Hampshire, who inspired us with his irrepressible enthusiasm about politics and research. We also greatly appreciate the help of the following people: Sofia Collignon Delmar for the literature review, Cassie Schwartz for randomizing the data, Michael Elliott for assisting administering treatments, and other research assistants from the University of Southampton and UCL.

## Author details

Matt Ryan (PhD) is Lecturer in Governance and Public Policy at the University of Southampton. His research focuses on democratic innovation and participation in politics, the policymaking process, and social science research methods. His most recent publications appear in *European Journal of Political Research*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Journal of Public Deliberation* and *PS: Political Science and Politics*.

Gerry Stoker is Centenary Research Professor at the University of Canberra, Australia and Chair in Governance at the University of Southampton, UK. He has authored or edited 33 books and published over 100 refereed articles. He has been an engaged scholar throughout his career working with governments, think tanks, public servants, political parties and civic organisations in many different countries.

Peter John is Professor of Public Policy at King's College London. He is interested in how to involve citizens in public policy and in randomized controlled trials. His most recent books are *Field Experiments in Political Science and Public Policy* (Routledge 2017) and *How Far to Nudge* (Edward Elgar 2018).

Alice Moseley (PhD) is a lecturer in Politics at the University of Exeter, UK. Her main areas of research interest are in the fields of behavioural public policy and public administration, and civic engagement. Her articles appear in journals including *Public Administration*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Public Administration Review*, and *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.

Oliver James (BA Oxon, PhD LSE London) Professor of Political Science, University of Exeter. Research topics: politics of public services, citizen-provider relationships, organisational reform. Publications: (co-editor) *Experiments in Public Management Research* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), James, O. et al. 2016. 'The Politics of Agency Death: Ministers and the Survival of Government Agencies' *British Journal of Political Science*. 46 (4), 763-784.

Liz Richardson is a Reader in Politics at the University of Manchester, UK. Her research interests include: decentralised urban governance; public policy; citizen participation; and participatory research methods. Her work has appeared in a range of journals such as the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Social Policy and Administration*, *Politics and Governance*, and *Policy and Politics*.

Matia Vannoni (PhD, UCL) is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Bocconi University, where he is working on a project which studies the interaction between politics and bureaucracy in contemporary democracies. His research has featured in several journals, such as *Policy Studies Journal*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, and *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*.

## **Abstract**

Interventions aimed at increasing the supply and representativeness of elected officials range from facilitative to the formally authorised. This paper reports on a field experiment aimed at testing the effect of facilitative approaches at the local level based on a collaboration between parish councils and the research team. We randomly allocated 818 parish council clerks across five counties in Southern England, either to receive information and the opportunity for member training for recruitment, or not to receive this contact. We investigated the effect of this intervention on political recruitment. Despite evidence of an effect on use of social media, our results suggest that there are significant institutional and structural barriers to participation in local politics that cannot easily be overcome using facilitative measures.

According to Schattschneider (1960: 35), ‘The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent’. The leading institutions for decision-making in representative democracies continue to fail to reflect the populations they claim to represent. This concern stimulated a whole generation of social scientists to highlight the persistence of unequal participation in politics (e.g. Scholzman, Verba and Brady, 2012). Yet there is much less work that considers what can be done about it. What then is the best way to encourage greater supply and diversity in political representation? All interventions face the problem that patterns of representation are embedded, both in social relationships and institutional structures. Recent research on recruitment has highlighted the importance of cultural norms and routinized practices that surround institutions designed to deliver equality in the representative process (Franceschet, Krook and Piscopo 2012, Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). Recruitment for political office often takes place through informal interactions, initially at the local level, as a result of face-to-face invitations to stand for office. These practices persist over time. It is also likely that the characteristics of recruiters and recruits are likely to converge, which may discourage those from outside these circles to consider standing for office. The embedded nature of political recruitment may encourage policy-makers to believe that formal or legally-sanctioned measures are needed to open up democracy. However, such an approach might run the risk of alienating those currently engaging in recruitment and who do not see themselves as the problem. It may be more appropriate to go along the grain of local institutions by working with the people who hold positions of responsibility to find out if reform can be stimulated through their efforts.

In this research, we ask whether a tailored package of softer interventions, including targeted mobilisation, information and training, and low-cost nudges, motivates change in patterns of recruitment of political volunteers. The successes of nudge techniques in encouraging behaviour change using low-cost interventions have been identified in a number of studies (Thaler and Sunstein 2009). Similarly, targeted recruitment information campaigns have been successful in encouraging deeper levels of political participation among under-

represented groups in local-level democratic innovations (Smith 2009) and for the supply of women candidates within the US Republican party (Karpowitz et al 2017). Our research tests whether a package of softer mobilisations and behaviour change techniques can increase political recruitment at the local level. We focus on those standing for local office at the tier of electoral democracy in England that lies closest to the community it represents: the parish and town council. Parish councils have experienced the de-politicisation common in many parts of local government in England (see Copus et al. 2013). While performing an invaluable role in their local communities, these councils often fail to take advantage of the full range of democratic opportunities (Pearce and Ellwood 2010, 52). Contested elections have become the exception rather than the norm, giving the impression that the electoral process is closed rather than open. Practicing electoral democracy within state structures at this granular ‘parish’ scale is relatively unusual. However, despite their vast number and their basis as recruitment for higher offices, parish councils and their recruitment have not received the attention we might expect from political scientists.

We report a field experiment, co-designed with parish council associations, which randomly allocated 818 parish council clerks across five counties in Southern England, either to receive basic information on elections and recruitment or detailed information and the opportunity for member training. Specifically, we examine whether providing information about the benefits of widening recruitment, conveying the advantages of holding competitive elections, and providing information about potential strategies for encouraging a diverse range of candidates affect whether parishes place these issues on their council meeting agendas, adopt a variety of recruitment methods, recruit more candidates, hold contested elections, and improve the social representation of parish councils. Although we affected some of the recruitment strategies of local councils, we did not increase the supply and diversity of representation. If this finding is generalizable to other contexts, locally-customised, behavioural techniques may not be able to affect political recruitment directly.

## **Who stands for office and why?**

Representatives and politically active citizens do not reflect the demographic make-up of the population. This bias is a concern for democracy if important citizen groups are underrepresented, and the pool of those who engage in collective decision-making continues to decline. There is a vast literature on the conditions that affect participation in, and recruitment to, a range of political and representative bodies, some more partisan than others. There is much agreement that one condition is almost always necessary for recruitment to positions of representation in particular: in the majority of cases an external stimulus (communication) is needed to recruit a person to stand for office (McLeod et al 1999). In most cases, citizens get involved in civic or political activities through contacts already known to them, as recruiters tend to look first to relatively closed networks, and value people with the same characteristics that they themselves possess (Crowder-Meyer 2011, Brady et al. 1995, 1999). All things being equal, this condition of skewed representation will not reverse itself without interventions aimed at the recruitment process. It would be expected that without systemic interventions, representatives and party members remain disproportionately high in age, white ethnicity and male.

It is easy to conclude that the fault lies alone with conscious nepotistic behaviour, 'old boys club' or 'school tie' loyalties. While there is a persistence of these networks and negative effects on recruitment (see Bjarnegård 2013), the problem is also a practical one of finding people who are prepared to give up their time to stand for office. Recruiters have developed strategies for coping with the difficulty of finding people. They like to contact people who they know, as they seek confidence that the recruit will do a good job. Understandably, they may try to recruit someone with whom they have a close personal connection, often a family connection (Van Liefferinge, Devos and Steyvers 2012), those with a shared identity (Lim 2008). Through their weaker ties, they identify individuals who share commitment to a particular cause, group, or identity (Della Porta and Diani 2005). From this vantage, softer, facilitative interventions may

allow an expansion in the scope of recruit identification to include, for example, a shared pride in the local parish and a shared desire for a well-functioning community.

However, simply being a member of the identity group is not sufficient; the content of the information and nature of conversations matter (Mcclurg 2003). It requires an understanding of the hopes and concerns of recruits. Potential recruits will consider the decision to stand in terms of both negative consequences and positive gains. From the potential recruits side, Brady et al. (1995, 1999) suggest that the significant characteristics that engender a positive response to recruitment are the leverage of the recruiter over the recruit, time-richness (which helps retirees), and once again, a similar race and gender among both.

The incentives for standing for office are well-theorised. Individuals stand for office to influence decisions to obtain public goods that they see as desirable. They often also join political organisations and stand for election in order to have a programmatic influence on those representatives higher up in a party/organisation (Whiteley et al 1993). Although most parish councils do not run on party-based platforms, the access parish and town councillors can have to councillors at the next tier up of local government, i.e. district councillors, may be perceived as helping them attain the public goods they value. A final important incentive is that of personal power or money (Costantini and King 1984). Recruits may see potential to improve their own capital in various ways even when there is no direct financial incentive.

Nevertheless, there are significant costs and fears that potential recruits face when running for office. The obvious opportunity cost for potential recruits is that of time needed to stand for election and carry out the job (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Lawless (2012) also highlights concerns with fundraising and negative consequences of being more in the public eye. A most noteworthy concern in the decision of whether or not to stand is the potential to win. Norris (2002) has shown that national context, in particular differences in liberal social attitudes across countries, significantly affects female candidature and success. Moreover, in the British



case, party members are often forced to run in 'foregone, losing' contests out of a sense of party duty only (Verhelst et al. 2013). In fact, quality often only becomes more important than loyalty when recruiters recruit for winnable seats (Steyvers et al. 2012).

A final related concern is ostensible efficacy in terms of ability to have impact when in the job. This concern can be linked to the lack of a general understanding (or indeed a general misunderstanding) of the roles and freedoms of representatives (Wheeler 2006). For Aars and Offendal (1998), a sense of probable efficacy comes from ambition/desire combined with a realistic chance to win and have influence. Norris (2002) draws a link here between the recruiter's preferences for certain characteristics mentioned above and potential efficacy. It may be that even when more forcible affirmative action-type strategies are employed to increase representation of important groups, complicated calculations by potential recruits of their potential efficacy once in the job muddy interpretations of the interventions effect. Evidence from studies that seek to assess whether women or minority ethnic groups tend to be less ambitious is mixed (Lawless 2012, Fox and Lawless 2010).

Meadowcroft (2001) emphasises that a mixture of incentives and dis-incentives are manifested usually over time and in between successive informal recruitment contacts. It is important to note that the decision to stand is conditioned by a complex mix of easily and less easily manipulated determinants e.g. upbringing, life experience, and previous participation (Lawless 2012, Youniss et al 1997, Hooghe et al 2004). This suggests that interventions need to be centred on clear understandings of the fears and ambitions of potential recruits and they ought to practically enable capacity and confidence-building through training or reassurance mechanisms.

Where then should a stimulus ideally come from? Even though communication using mass media has been successful, evidence from the U.S. suggests being asked by an individual significantly increases the likelihood of standing as a candidate (Brady et al. 1999), which is

consistent across subgroups (Fox and Lawless 2010). Parish councils are a useful critical case for investigating recruitment interventions which encourage people to use such personal contacts and which use a combination of softer facilitative measures. When compared to local councils, parish councils do not tend to recruit from within existing party structures, therefore they provide an important test as to whether facilitative interventions aimed at increasing and diversifying recruitment can cut through in community politics that appear removed from some more familiar formal structures of political patrimony.

### **Influencing political participation in parish councils**

In view of the complex range of factors that influence political participation, we developed a multi-faceted research intervention that could be tested experimentally and which targeted a range of potential determinants of participation. Our intervention was designed to communicate the need for greater representation in parish and town councils and for greater democratic engagement with the electoral process. Specifically, it was designed to encourage a greater number and diversity of parish councillors to stand, and to encourage a greater degree of competitiveness in the electoral process. Parish councils in England often find it difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of people to stand for office for a range of reasons, some of which are revealed in our survey reported in our results section, and they tend to be dominated by a certain demographic, notably older people, males, and those from white ethnic backgrounds.

Civil parishes in England represent the closest level of democratic government to the people. In urban areas parishes were incorporated over time into larger borough, district or city councils, however recent legislation encourages the restoration of parish councils in urban areas. Mostly though, parish and town councils serve the rural areas of the country. Some 16 million or so residents of the UK (roughly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the population) live under the jurisdiction of a parish or town council. These councils range in size from one town council of 70,000 inhabitants to very small parish councils of less than 200.

Parish councils levy taxes by placing a precept on council tax. Councillors are unsalaried and much of their activity involves maintaining amenities for public recreation, e.g. management of parks, the village hall, allotments as well as upkeep of paths, bridleways, public toilets and war memorials. They also have various mandates to make representations on planning issues to councils up the chain of government. Elections in parishes of more than 200 residents are due to be held every four years. Many, though not all, parishes held their elections at the same time as the 2015 General Election.

A high proportion of parish and town council elections are uncontested (Sandford 2014), with too few candidates standing for the number of seats available. From 1998 to 2000, there were fewer candidates than seats in 36.2% of parish, town and (Welsh) community council elections; moreover, a further 31.8% did not have elections, as the number of candidates was the same as the number of available seats (Woods et al 2003, p. 5). In these cases, no competitive elections took place, as candidates who are nominated were simply re-elected without opposition. When there are fewer candidates than seats, councillors can subsequently be co-opted to make up the numbers providing they are nominated by two people. Where there are insufficient candidates standing for a council to be quorate (i.e. less than 50 per cent of seats filled), a new election is triggered. In some cases, parish councils are merged or even dissolved where the challenge of recruiting candidates is most severe. The lack of candidates and their informal means of recruitment limit diversity. Woods et al (2003, p.8) report that 'only around one in three town, parish or community councillors are women – little more than the proportion a decade ago. In our four case study areas, half of councillors surveyed were aged over 60, and only one out of 140 was aged under 30. A third of councillors were retired, and the majority were middle class.' There is no reason to believe this pattern has changed since 2003. A more competitive electoral process, and greater number of candidates, would obviate the need for co-opting candidates or re-scheduling elections, enhance the credibility of parish councils, and could potentially lead to more socially diverse representation.

The intervention was targeted at the clerks, who are the principal paid officials. The idea is that these individuals, although politically neutral and not involved in the day-to-day decision-making of the council, have influence over the democratic practices of the council, and could be persuaded to take a more pro-active approach, either by directly encouraging people to stand as candidates, or by taking measures (such as publicity, promotion or raising the issue with councillors or in other local arenas) that would lead to more candidates coming forward. Targeting bureaucrats is a legitimate and practical way of encouraging more democratic participation among citizens, and indeed bureaucrats often do play a statutory role in this regard by implementing policies designed to increase democratic engagement in areas such as electoral participation (Butler 2010, White et al. 2015). Moreover, clerks are the first point of contact for receiving information from parish council membership bodies, or from local or national government, so are often the most up-to-date and knowledgeable people involved with the council in terms of new requirements for parish councils, innovations or policy developments affecting them. They also are the conduits for passing such information onto councillors, often through direct contact with councillors including in parish council meetings. Clerks would be the most suitable first point of contact for our interventions, which they could cascade to the members of the council including the chair. The effectiveness of committed bureaucrats in helping sustain engagement by local underrepresented populations with political decision-making has been witnessed in other contexts, such as participatory budgeting in Brazil (Abers 2000). We also understood that the politicians would not necessarily believe recruitment to be in their direct, short-term interest as they may lose seats as a consequence. We wanted this short-term disincentive to be overruled by their desire for greater legitimacy of their role, which suffers from the lack of contestation in elections. Of course, recruitment can be a double-edged sword for the clerk. Clerks are often most enthusiastic about reinvigorating the political life of the parish and recruitment aimed at increasing the legitimacy of the council, and in turn their role. However, they fear that direct recruitment may be viewed as trying to manipulate the hiring and firing of their own principals.

This multi-faceted intervention, designed to maximise impact, involved a letter, a briefing paper and a training event. The purpose of these was to use persuasion and information, i.e. a facilitative intervention, to encourage the desired outcomes associated with greater electoral democracy, rather than using a coercive approach. The intervention cited the benefits of holding competitive elections and of recruiting a diverse range of candidates; and used endorsement by academic experts and peers, i.e. other councils within the county of the parish targeted. Research indicates that endorsement can be a highly effective form of persuasion in some contexts, with the credibility of endorsers being key, as suggested by source credibility theory (Hovland and Weiss 1951-1952, Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953). From source attractiveness theory (McGuire, 1969) and the literature on peer effects (Penner, 2002, Smith et al. 2015) it can be reasoned that the extent to which the endorser is either known to the target of the endorsement or considered a peer may also be important in determining its effect. As discussed in more detail below, our intervention combines aspects of peer endorsement, and endorsement by what might be considered to be persons in respected or credible positions with regards to the subject matter. The intervention also acknowledged the barriers to recruiting candidates, and suggested practical measures for overcoming these including information and the offer of a briefing session.

## **Research design**

The field experiment was conducted from October 2014 to May 2015 with parish and town councils from five counties in the South, South East and Midlands area of England (Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Suffolk, Northamptonshire, and Leicestershire and Rutland).<sup>1</sup> We worked in collaboration with the chief executives of the five County Associations of Local Councils (CALCs<sup>2</sup>) in these areas who provided lists and contact details for their councils as well

---

<sup>1</sup> . Approved by UCL's Research Ethics Committee 3949/001, 18 July 2012, amended 27 August 2014.

<sup>2</sup> CALCs are independent membership organisations providing representation, advice, training and support for parish and town councils in each County area of England. CALCs are affiliated to NALC, the National Association of Local Councils.

as participating in the overall design of the experiment. Interventions were developed through a sequence of consultation meetings with CEOs to ensure: 1) that the intervention was a field test that ran in line with on-going recruitment practices, which could be implemented in perpetuity; and 2) that the intervention reflected theory and grounded knowledge from experience in the field. These counties have a strong diversity of councils in terms of size, party politicisation, and distance from urban centres. We conducted an extensive pilot with clerks, councillors, and CEOs from sixty parish and town councils from the participating five counties that were due to hold elections in 2014 to find out what methods these parishes used for recruitment and issues they faced in recruiting parish councillors. We held workshops with clerks and councillors from parishes who were willing to participate, and in which we discussed our approach and considered a range of possible interventions. We asked the participants in the pilot to trial some of these ideas and we supported them and received feedback. The pilot informed the design of the experiment including both treatment and outcome measurement. Key findings of the pilot were that feasible, and affordable, interventions could be performed with clerks because of the role they play in mediating communication within parishes, for example, via newsletters, notice boards, local media, community social media and informal channels. Intervening with clerks also provided the advantage over intervening with councillors that clerks had less mixed motivations and fewer potential conflicts of interest for supporting contested elections. .

The sample was the 977 councils that held elections on May 7th 2015, the same date as the general election, which we did not think this affected our experiment because local elections are commonly held on the same date as national elections and would not be thought to affect the aggregate supply of parish councillors. Parish and town council clerks from these councils were randomly allocated to either a treatment or a control condition and the experiment was implemented in October 2014. We then compared outcome measures relating to practices for recruiting parish councillors, the diversity and number of candidates recruited, and the number of contested elections for our treatment and control conditions, which was collected from May

until October 2015 following the elections (see Figure 1 for a flow chart). The dataset and its description are deposited with the UK Data Service.<sup>3</sup>

## **Randomisation**

The unit of randomisation was parish and town council clerks. Because some parish clerks work across parishes, representing two or more neighbouring parishes, especially in small rural parishes, we randomised by clerk rather than by council. A total of 818 participants were contacted, 410 (50.1%) of whom were assigned to the treatment group and 408 (49.9%) to the control group. Clerks were identified from the sample frame of parishes and were randomized in two stages. First, clerks were nested within parishes in order to prevent double-counting of clerks who presided over multiple parishes. Second, they were blocked (randomised) by county. Within each block, 124 clerks were contacted in Hampshire, 91 in Hertfordshire, 174 in Leicestershire and Rutland, 130 in Northamptonshire, and 299 in Suffolk. Two clerks who worked in parishes in more than one county were removed from the sample.

Table 1 shows the numbers of clerks randomized by county.

<Table 1 about here>

## **Treatment and control letters**

Treatment and control letters were designed and standardised with advice from CALCs about what would constitute a standard letter, and an enhanced non-standard communication (both letters are available in the online appendix). The control letter was a standardisation across counties of the communications parish councils typically receive from their CALCs in the run up to the May elections, when county associations routinely write to their members to remind them of the importance of holding contested elections. The idea is that the control is a

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter John, University College London. (2016). *Citizen contribution to local public services - Part 3*. Data catalogue. UK Data Service. SN: 852199, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-852199>

baseline of 'normal service' that parishes would expect from their association to allow the treatment to show the value added of an additional intervention.

The control letter stated that the author (CALCs) had a mission to enhance the recruitment and diversity of parish councillors. It asked the clerks to place the item of widening recruitment onto the agenda of the next parish council meeting, as well as ensuring that discussions were recorded in the meeting's minutes so that parishioners could access them. In the control letter it was stated that 'our aim is to increase the number of contested elections in 2015'.

In the treatment letters, there was also a statement that the authors (CALCS and the academic team) had a mission to enhance the recruitment and diversity of parish councillors. It also asked the clerks to place the item of widening recruitment onto the agenda of the next parish council meeting. Both letters mentioned the issue of contested elections. In addition, the treatment group received an invitation to attend a briefing session, information about what other councils in their local area had successfully done to improve recruitment, a background briefing paper, and an endorsement from the academic team.

The treatment letter was jointly branded from the academic team conducting the project and the relevant county association, while the control letter was a shorter, basic letter sent only from the relevant county association. The treatment letter specified councils in the relevant county, which had themselves benefited from contested elections. In the treatment letter a quotation was also included from a parish clerk whose parish had been involved in the pilot study in 2014, citing specific examples of methods they had used in their parish to enhance recruitment of candidates. The treatment letter was enhanced in the sense that it included an implicit endorsement of the idea of widening recruitment and contested elections from a group of academic experts whose names and universities were cited, and from peers (other named, neighbouring councils who had benefited from contested elections and widening recruitment). The treatment letter also included an invitation to attend a briefing session in the clerks' local



county area and appended to the letter was a background paper about the importance of a diverse and representative range of candidates at parish council level, the value of contested elections, common barriers to participation, and possibilities for increasing volunteer recruitment, in particular making better use of social media, issue-based recruitment and targeting via location of recruitment (see online appendix for further details).

### **Briefing sessions**

Five briefing sessions were held, one in each county taking part in the study, with each briefing session open to all councils within the county that had been randomly allocated to the treatment group and with the invitation to attend the briefing being issued as part of the treatment letter. The sessions all took place during November 2014. As with the treatment letter, the pilot workshops conducted in 2014 helped inform the design of these sessions. The briefing sessions could be attended by any member of the council, either the clerk or a councillor, and more than one member could attend. A total of 85 parish or town councils were represented at the briefing sessions, with 91 individuals attending in total.

The briefing sessions were facilitated by a member of the academic team. The sessions lasted two hours and were delivered according to a set protocol and timetable to ensure they were as similar as possible. The aims were to outline recruitment methods that had been used in the pilot study, discuss barriers to recruitment and ways of overcoming these (such as those discussed in the briefing document), and to encourage councils to start the process of writing a recruitment strategy for their parish or town council. The sessions consisted of a combination of presentations and group work, which were well received by the participants who made clear their desire to improve recruitment.

### **Outcome measures and data collection**

We first ascertained whether parish councils adopted different strategies to advertise elections and to recruit candidates (for example using websites, special events such as road

shows, newsletters, social media, or other media such as local radio) as a result of our treatments, and whether the treatment triggered discussions within parish councils between September 2014 and April 2015. The outcome measures in terms of recruitment were as follows: first, did councils hold a contested election in May 2015? We might expect a greater number of contested elections in councils receiving the treatment. Second, how many candidates were put forward in each council, and how many were elected as a consequence of contested elections? Here, our hypothesis was that more candidates would be put forward, and more candidates elected as a result of contested elections in treated parishes. Third, did treated councils, who had received the information about the importance of increasing the diversity of candidates, recruited more female candidates? We collected data on practices used for recruitment and advertising elections using a survey sent to clerks in our treatment and control conditions shortly after the May 2015 elections (see online Appendix).<sup>4</sup> The survey also asked respondents whether the item of widening recruitment had been added to parish council meeting agendas. The survey was designed and administered using Qualtrics. The same survey was sent to the treatment and control group. The survey was pre-tested on the 60 councils that had taken part in our initial pilot exercise (this pre-test was not part of the experiment itself but was used to refine the survey instrument and resulted in the addition of two extra questions).<sup>5</sup>

Data were gathered on whether the issues debated in the letters and briefings as well as the project itself and its members were mentioned in the discussions within parish councils through a manual search of all parish council meeting minutes that were posted online from the period Sept 2014 – April 2015.<sup>6</sup> The minutes search was also used to provide an indicator of the extent to which information about the project and messages from the treatment itself

---

<sup>4</sup> The survey was sent in mid-June 2015 and several reminders followed. The last reminder was sent at the end of June and data were gathered after that.

<sup>5</sup> The pilot survey was sent at the end of May 2015.

<sup>6</sup> This allowed us to cross validate findings from the survey. More specifically, we were able to see whether those parish councils which claimed to have put the item of widening recruitment, for instance, on their agenda actually did it, by looking at whether that item was transposed into the minutes.

concerning elections and enhancing recruitment had permeated the actual discussions of formal council meetings.

Research assistants were employed to assist with this task and were given a clear protocol for the search, with each assistant searching one of our five counties.<sup>7</sup> Parish council meeting minutes were obtained from parish and town councils' websites. Although parish and town councils have a legal duty to publish their council meeting minutes, not every council does this through their website, and some councils (11%) did not, at the time of writing, have their own websites. We managed to obtain online minutes for the period of interest (September 2014 - April 2015) for 74% of parish councils.<sup>8</sup> The number of sets of minutes per council reflects the number of meetings held per year, which varies by council, with some holding monthly meetings while others have them less often. The number of sets of minutes posted online therefore varied from 1-8 per council. The researchers were provided with a list of keywords to search relating to the treatment itself and to the desired outcomes of the treatment using the find command in Microsoft Word or the equivalent function in Adobe Reader (see results section below for the list of keywords used).<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of the statistical analysis, we generated a score that totalled the number of times each keyword was mentioned in the minutes over the time period September 2014 - April 2015.

The electoral data on the number of contested elections held, and numbers of candidates and seats, and candidates' sex,<sup>10</sup> were obtained from official published sources, i.e. *Notices of Elections, Statements of Persons Nominated*, and official election results which are available directly from the District or Borough Councils (many were available online and councils were contacted directly where this was not the case).

---

<sup>7</sup> For counties with a disproportionate number of parish councils that county was divided up between two research assistants.

<sup>8</sup> Among those parish councils with available minutes 47 per cent were in the control group and 53 per cent in the treatment group.

<sup>9</sup> Occasionally coders had to deal with scanned documents and in this case they had to check them manually.

<sup>10</sup> Through this route we managed to obtain candidate gender data for 96% of parish councils.

<Figure 1 about here>

## Results

The survey asked parish councils to indicate to what extent and how they advertised elections and also how they carried out the recruitment of new candidates. Overall, the responses were balanced between treatment and control groups. There is no difference in response rate between the councils, which was 35.2 per cent for the control group and 34.5 in the treatment group ( $z=-.2$ ,  $p=.8$ ). The main set of questions focused on a series of activities associated with the advertisement of elections. Table 2 summarises the results, giving percentages of responses in control and the treatment and z-scores of differences in proportions. There are no statistically significant differences. To take account of the total number of activities, we summed all these scores taking each positive response as a score of one, so that those parish councils which engaged in all the activities get an overall score of seven, the total number of all the potential activities related to the advertisement of elections in our survey. The control group has an average of 3.1 activities whereas the treatment had an average of 3.0 ( $t=0.59$ ,  $p=0.55$ ).

<Table 2 about here>

The survey also asked councils whether they carried out any activities associated with widening recruitment. In other words, we asked councils whether and how they sought to actively recruit new candidates. Table 3 reports the percentages, which did not vary by the treatment. The exception is the use of social media, which was highlighted prominently in our training sessions. We found that 11.1 per cent and 18.6 per cent of the councils respectively in the control and treatment group used these methods. Of course, such a finding could be put down to chance and also is not significant at the .05 level, but it is consistent with our treatment, so provides some evidence that a part of our treatment changed recruitment practices as well as being a manipulation check that the treatment took place. Against this, many aspects of our

treatment did not have an impact. When summing these activities, parishes in the control group carried out 2.2 whereas those in the control did 2.3 ( $t=1.2$ ,  $p=.21$ ).

<Table 3 about here>

A desk search of council minutes aimed to find evidence for our treatment, namely whether the project and the briefing sessions were discussed within parish councils, and also to find out whether our treatment triggered discussions on elections and recruitment within parish councils. The minutes' search was also functional to cross validate findings from the survey concerning whether the item of 'widening recruitment' had been placed on the parish council agenda, as had been requested in the treatment letter. We find evidence for our treatment in parish councils' minutes, which acts as an additional manipulation check. The project and the two investigators who carried out the briefing sessions, Gerry Stoker and Peter John, figure more prominently in the minutes of the treatment group. In other words, the search of the minutes shows that a series of key words related to the project and the treatment itself is statistically more present in the minutes of those councils which were subject to the treatment than those that were not, as shown in Table 4. When we summed all these scores for the keywords and we find that the control group has an average of almost zero whereas in the treatment group the average is 0.11 ( $t=-4.18$ ,  $p=0.00$ ). Although the project was discussed within parish councils, there is no evidence for the treatment triggering discussions on elections and recruitment. We looked for key words such as 'election', 'candidate' and 'recruitment' in the councils' minutes and found no difference between treatment and control groups: see Table 5. A comparison of the sum of the scores shows that the treatment group has an average of 5.62 and the control group of 5.88 ( $t=0.54$ ,  $p=0.59$ ). Finally, the minutes' search was also functional to cross-validate the results from the survey. The search for the key words 'widening recruitment' shows consistent findings with respect to the survey, i.e. no significant difference between treatment and control conditions for parishes adding this item to their parish council meeting agendas as evidenced either in the survey responses or the meeting minutes.

<Table 4 and Table 5 about here>

The results show that even though the parishes received our treatment they, did not do much as a result of the interventions. Comparing the numbers of contested elections, there is an average of 17.0 in the control group compared to 15.5 in the treatment, a non-significant difference ( $z=0.74$ ,  $p=.45$ ). Comparing the numbers of seats that were subject of election or nomination in each council, an average of 8.4 per council in the control group compares to 8.7 in the treatment group ( $t=1.3$ ,  $p=.18$ ). Taking just the contested elections, the score is 10.2 for the control group and 10.7 for the treatment group ( $t=.62$ ,  $p=.53$ ); for the uncontested elections, it is 8.1 in the control and 8.3 in the treatment ( $t=1.5$ ,  $p=.13$ ). A similar pattern occurs for the number of candidates: 7.8 in the control and 7.9 in the treatment ( $t=.52$ ,  $p=.6$ ). For contested elections, we find 13.6 in the control versus 14.4 in the treatment ( $t=.56$ ,  $p=.57$ ), and for uncontested elections 6.5 in the control and 6.8 in the treatment ( $t=.11$ ,  $p=.25$ ). None of these differences is statistically significant. Regression allows for the clustering of the standard errors to take account of the shared parishes and allows for control variables to be included (see Appendix E). The null results of the treatment are confirmed for each outcome variable.<sup>11</sup>

The treatment was also designed to influence diversity. Both the treatment letter and the briefing session were focused on widening recruitment and, more specifically, better representation of women, outcomes ascertained from the list of candidates for each parish. No significant differences are present across treatment and control groups with respect to the number of women who put forward themselves for election or for nomination, in uncontested elections. The average of female candidates is 2.43 and 2.49 respectively in the control and treatment groups ( $t=-0.534$ ,  $p=.593$ ). The null results are confirmed in the regression model (see Appendix E).

---

<sup>11</sup> We tested for the balance of the randomisation. We only have whether the council is warded or grouped, that is brought together for joint administration. There is some indication that there are more of these parishes in the treatment group with 22 per cent in the treatment group and 18 per cent in the control group, but the difference is not significant (test of difference in proportions,  $z= -1.7$ ,  $p=.09$ ). Accordingly, we control for this in the regression analyses.

Overall, the findings show that although parish councils received the treatment, there was no change in the extent to which or how they advertised elections and recruited new candidates, apart from the use of social media. Recruitment of either the number of new candidates, or their composition, did not change

## **Conclusion**

Many political organisations, such as the parish and town councils, struggle to attain sufficient numbers of candidates coming forward to enable them to hold contested elections, and lack diversity in candidates. Many groups are underrepresented, women in particular. Our study sought to address this failure of representation by co-designing and testing in a field setting an experimental intervention aimed at encouraging parish and town councils to adopt measures that might help increase the number, and diversity, of candidates coming forward, and consequently the number of contested elections held. To ensure the strength, robustness, and validity of the treatment we developed an intervention that combined a set of soft, facilitative interventions. Following consultation with key actors and advocates for wider representation, we designed a letter, a briefing paper, and a training event based upon knowledge about barriers and enablers of participation at this level; gleaned both from literature, and from a pilot study and consultation we conducted with parish and town councils. We worked with parishes in five English counties and randomly allocated half to receive our intervention and half to receive a control intervention. Overall, we carried out a successful implementation of our interventions, where councils received our materials, carried out some of the recommendations and attended our briefing events.

Our intervention, when compared to our control, did not significantly impact on any of our main outcome measures, either in terms of practices used to recruit more candidates, or the outcomes of recruitment efforts, i.e. the number and diversity of candidates in terms of gender, or the number of contested elections. The only effect we found was greater use of social media-based approaches to recruit candidates.

In an era of austerity and technocratic governance it is particularly tempting for governments and other collective political authorities to reach for low cost nudges to try and solve collective problems. Where these efforts are successful they should be encouraged, their limits need to be tested. Our results illustrate the difficulty of overcoming the significant institutional and structural barriers to participation in local politics, which derive from the social networks that we began with. Our large and diverse sample allows us to conclude that the chances of our result being a false negative are very low. Any generalisation of the results beyond parish councils comes with the usual caveats, but we imagined that facilitative interventions were most likely to work in parish councils that benefit from an absence of the party politics that limits the pool of potential recruits even further. Nevertheless it may be the case that the close ties and the face-to-face nature of parish-pump politics place limits on competitive elections.

Alternative approaches could include education to address underlying perceptions and preconceptions about the parish councillor role that inhibit people from standing. The intervention evidences the weakness of nudge techniques in being able to recreate the quick wins they have had in other contexts when it comes to tackling the levels of inequality in political participation. We can interpret this either pessimistically by concluding that the hurdle faced is so high that such interventions will never succeed in jumping it, or more optimistically, by hoping that these approaches have value but are slow burners and may produce outcomes we cannot here detect. It may be that such interventions are necessary but not sufficient conditions for change and need to be combined with other approaches, although as we have pointed out change that is more radical will require by its nature commensuration of opposing perspectives on the causes of unequal recruitment. Given the persistence of inequalities over time, it should be no surprise that a turnaround requires patience and persistence. But maybe more coercive or innovative strategies are required to overcome the enduring flaw in the pluralist heaven.



## References

- Aars, J., and Offerdal, A., 1998. "Local Political Recruitment in Crisis? A Comparison of Finland and Norway," *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 21, 207–230 <doi:10.1111/j.1467-9477.1998.tb00013.x>
- Abers, R. (2000). *Inventing Local Democracy: Grassroots Politics in Brazil*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Bjarnegård, E. and Kenny, M. (2016) "Comparing Candidate Selection: A Feminist Institutional Approach", *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 370–392.
- Bjarnegård, E. (2013) *Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment: Explaining male Dominance in Parliamentary Representation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Brady, H. E., Schlozman, K.L. and Verba, S., 1999. "Prospecting for Participants: Rational Expectations and the Recruitment of Political Activists", *The American Political Science Review*, 93, 153–168.
- Brady, H. E., Verba, S. and Schlozman, K.L., 1995. "A Resource beyond SES Model of Political Participation", *The American Political Science Review*, 89, 271–294.
- Butler, D. M. 2010. "Monitoring Bureaucratic Compliance: Using Field Experiments to Improve Governance." *Public Sector Digest* (winter):41-44.
- Copus, C., Sweeting, D. and Whigfield, M. (2013) "Repolicising and Redemocratising Local Democracy and the Public Realm: why we Need Councillors and Councils", *Policy & Politics*, Volume 41, Number 3, pp. 389-408.
- Costantini, E., and King, J., 1984. "The Motives of Political Party Activists: A Factor-analytic Exploration," *Political Behavior*, 6, 79–93.
- Crowder-Meyer, Melody, 2011. "Candidate Recruitment and Party Networks: How the Characteristics and Choices of Local Party Leaders Affect Women's Representation," in *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*.
- Della Porta, D., and Diani, M. 2005. *Social Movements*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Fox, R. L., and Lawless, J. L., 2010. "If Only They'd Ask: Gender, Recruitment, and Political Ambition," *The Journal of Politics*, 72, 310.
- Franceschet, S., Krook, M.L. and Piscopo, J.M. (Eds.), 2012. *The Impact of Gender Quotas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hooghe, M., Stolle, D. and Stouthuysen, P. 2004. "Head Start In Politics: The Recruitment Function Of Youth Organizations Of Political Parties In Belgium (Flanders)", *Party Politics*, 10, pp. 193–212.
- Hovland, C.I. and Weiss, W. 1951-1952. "The influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15: 635-650.

- Hovland, C.I., Janis, I.L. and Kelley, H.H. 1953. *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological studies of opinion change*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Karpowitz, C. F., Monson, J. Q. and Preece, J. R. (2017), "How to Elect More Women: Gender and Candidate Success in a Field Experiment" *American Journal of Political Science*. doi:10.1111/ajps.12300
- Lawless, J. L., 2012 *Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office*, *The Journal of Politics* (Cambridge University Press), LXXIV <t\_S0022381612000734> [accessed 24 June 2013]
- Lim, C., 2008. "Social Networks and Political Participation : How Do Networks Matter?," *Social Forces*, 87.
- Mcclurg, S. D., 2003. "Social Networks and Political Participation: The Role of Social Interaction in Explaining Political Participation," *Political Research Quarterly*, 56, 449–464 <doi:10.1177/106591290305600407>
- McGuire, W. 1969. "The Nature of Attitudes and Attitude Change," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. 3, ed. by Gardner L., and Aronson, E., Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, pp. 136-314.
- McLeod, J. M, Dietram A. Scheufele, and Moy, P., 1999. "Community , Communication, and Participation : The Role of Mass Media and Interpersonal Discussion in Local Political Participation," *Political Communication*, 16, 315–366.
- Meadowcroft, J. 2001. "Political Recruitment and Local Representation: The Case of Liberal Democrat Councillors," *Local Government Studies*, 27, 19–36
- Norris, P., 2002. *Democratic Phoenix*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 290.
- Norris, P., and Lovenduski, J. 1995. *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in British Parliament*, ed. by Cambridge University Press.
- Penner, L.A. 2002. "Dispositional and Organizational Influences on Sustained Volunteerism: An interactionist perspective," *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(3) 447-467.
- Sandford, Mark. 2014. Parish and town councils: recent issues. London: House of Commons Library.
- Schattschneider, E.E. 1960. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Scholzman, K.L., Verba, S. and Brady, H.E. 2012. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Smith, S., Windmeijer, F. and Wright, E. 2015, "Peer Effects in Charitable Giving: Evidence from the (Running) Field," *Econ J*, 125: 1053–1071 <doi:10.1111/eoj.12114>
- Smith, G. (2009) *Democratic Innovations: Designing institutions for citizen participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Steyvers, K., Reynaert, H., Block, T. and Verhelst, T., 2010. "Party And Cocooning? No Paradox For Mayoral Recruitment In Belgium". *Lex Localis -Journal Of Self-Government*, pp. 1–26.
- Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Van Liefferinge, H., Devos, C. and Steyvers, K. 2012. "What's in a Name? Current Effects of Family Politicization on Legislative Candidates' Career Start in Belgium," *The Social Science Journal*, 49, 219–228.
- Verhelst, T., Reynaert, H. and Steyvers, K. 2013. "Political Recruitment and Career Development of Local Councillors in Europe," in *Local Councillors in Europe*, ed. by Bjorn; Egner, David; Sweeting, and Peter-Jan Klok, Stuttgart: Springer VS, pp. 27–50.
- Wheeler, P., 2006. *How Local Parties Recruit Councillors*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- White, A. R., Nathan, N.L. and Faller, J.K. 2015. "What Do I Need to Vote? Bureaucratic Discretion and Discrimination by Local Election Officials." *American Political Science Review* 109:129-142.
- Whiteley, P. F., Seyd, P. and Bissell, P. 1993. "Explaining Party Activism : The Case of the British Conservative Party," *British Journal of Political Science*, 79–94.
- Youniss, J., McLellan, J. A. and Yates, M. 1997. "What We Know About Engendering Civic Identity," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40, 620–631.
- Woods, Michael, Edwards, B., Anderson, J. Gardner, G. 2003, *Participation, Power and Rural Community governance in England and Wales*, Full Report of Research Activities and Results, <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/departamental/dges/doc/ESRC-final-report.doc>.

## Tables and Figures.

**Table 1: Randomization of Clerks by County**

	Hants	Herts	Leicestershire and Rutland	Northamptonshire	Suffolk	Total
<b>Control</b>	62	45	87	65	149	408
<b>Treatment</b>	62	46	87	65	150	410
<b>Total</b>	124	91	174	130	229	818

**Table 2: Election Advertisement (Surveyed) by Treatment and Control**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Per cent control</i>	<i>Per cent treatment</i>	<i>Z-score</i>	<i>N</i>
Elections added as an agenda item to parish or town council meeting	58.6	55.2	0.62	341
Elections discussed at parish or town council meeting	56.8	59.3	0.47	341
Elections advertised at a special event, e.g. roadshow, stall at community event	4.1	6.4	0.62	341
Elections advertised in parish or town council	63.9	55.8	1.52	341
Distributed leaflet about candidates	5.9	7.0	0.4	341
Put up a poster to advertise election	67.5	55.3	1.56	341
Included item about election on parish, town council or community website	43.2	42.4	0.14	341
Elections advertised in some other way	10.7	12.2	0.45	341

**Table 3: Widening Recruitment (Surveyed) by Treatment and Control**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Per cent control</i>	<i>Per cent treatment</i>	<i>Z-score</i>	<i>N</i>
Added item of widening recruitment	52.1	52.9	0.15	341
Held an event aimed at recruiting candidates	5.3	6.4	0.42	341
Put a notice in parish or town council newsletter	74.0	72.1	0.40	341
Put an advert for candidates on parish council's website	46.5	55.2	1.68	341
Used social media to recruit candidates	11.2	18.6	1.91	341
Used other media (e.g. local radio station/ newspaper	5.3	6.4	0.42	341
Other	21.3	20.4	0.21	341

**Table 4: Key Words related to Treatment in Minutes Search by Treatment and Control**

<i>Key Word</i>	<i>Average control</i>	<i>Average treatment</i>	<i>T-score</i>	<i>N</i>
Giving Time	0.006	0.98	-3.96	713
Professor John	0	0.005	-1.34	714
Professor Stoker	0	0.008	-1.65	714
Institution I	0	0	-	714
Institution II	0	0	-	714

**Table 5: Key Words related to Practices and Outcomes of Recruitment in Minutes Search by Treatment and Control**

<i>Key Word</i>	<i>Average control</i>	<i>Average treatment</i>	<i>T-score</i>	<i>N</i>
Election	4.9	4.6	0.75	718
Contested Election	0.8	0.9	-0.08	711
Uncontested Election	0.08	0.08	0.23	715
Widening Recruitment	0.07	0	3.09	712
Candidate	0.78	0.78	0.03	713

**Figure 1. Experimental flow chart**



